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Youth leadership development in virtual worlds: A case study

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of ‘The Dream It. Do It Initiative’ (D.I.D.I.), an informal learning program implemented in Teen Second Life (TSL), on leadership development. We found support for using TSL as a venue for leadership exploration. Specifically, we found that venturers became aware of the community issues in these worlds; they gained leadership skills such as teamwork, determination, and responsibility; and they learned how to use their mistakes to improve their projects. We conclude that virtual worlds, as “places for engagement”, can indeed be used to help youth explore their leadership potential with support from parents and educators.

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Keywords: Virtual worlds; youth leadership development; 21st century skills; virtual teams; informal learning.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses impact of ‘The Dream It. Do It Initiative’ (D.I.D.I.), an informal learning program, on leadership development. D.I.D.I. promoted youth change-making by using 3D virtual worlds as sandboxes for youth to experiment with social initiatives. It inspired young people to design and launch their own lasting social ventures in Teen Second Life (TSL) enabling them to have the transformative experience of leading positive social change.

Investment in developing leadership skills in teens and youth is considered to be an investment in the future of our society. One of the venues explored for youth leadership development is participation in community oriented social ventures, civic engagement or social activism (Garst & Johnson, 200; Mohammed, 2001). The business world has also looked at games and virtual environments as facilitators to develop leadership skills of the future. IBMs Global Innovation Outlook report (2007) contests that in today’s world which is distributed, global, virtual, faster paced, and fiercely competitive; the leadership of the future, like in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), needs to be more task oriented and dynamic.

There is much more to youth led organizations than preparing future leaders. As community-based youth organizations and youth activism have grown over the last two decades, youth’s role in the present as leaders and

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change agents has become equally important (Conner & Strobel, 2007). The Youth Leadership Summit organized by United Nations in 2006, “to engage young people in decisions about the future of their communities, regions, and our emerging global society”, is a step in this direction. These community based activities have provided youth the opportunity to explore identity, develop confidence, emotional skills, peer networks, and leadership and collaboration skills (Cassell et al, 2006; Dworkin et al, 2003).

Although youth leadership has been studied by several researchers, there is little consensus about what leadership is. Miller (1975) conceptualized youth leadership skills under five domains - decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, and group process. Many researchers (Seever et al., 1995; Orr & Gobeli, 1986) have adapted this framework to fit their research objectives. Conner & Strobel (2007) while analyzing a community based after school program used a three dimensional model to analyze its impact on leadership skills - Communication and Interpersonal Skills; Analytic and Critical Reflections; and Positive Involvement in the Community. Another interesting model used in relation to corporate leadership is the Sloan Leadership Model that breaks leadership skills and actions in four categories: Visioning, Sense-making, Relating, and Inventing (Ancona et al, 2007). Drawing from these models and observations of emerging leadership in D.I.D.I. we decided to analyze and discuss leadership skills from the following aspects – innovation, planning and management, team work, communication, and understanding self/self reflection.

1.1. About the project

The Dream It. Do It Initiative (<http://www.genv.net/didi>) is a partnership in Second Life (SL) between Youth Venture and Global Kids to improve health and healthcare. Youth Venture (www.genv.net), launched in 1996, inspires and invests in teams of young people to design and launch their own lasting social ventures. Global kids (www.globalkids.org) a non-profit organization, aims at developing youth to become global citizens and community leaders. The organization has become one of the pioneers in using virtual worlds in education and leadership. Through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the D.I.D.I. Initiative provided young people the seed funding and the support they needed to launch their own ventures that would create lasting community benefits.

The D.I.D.I process consisted of five main steps: attending workshops, developing a venture, presentation to a selection panel, venture launch, and building the movement. In the D.I.D.I. workshops conducted in TSL, youth identified health-related problems in their community (local, virtual or international) and brainstormed ideas to tackle the problems using their skills and interests. Then, they formed teams and developed detailed action plans for their venture projects. The workshops ended with teams presenting their ideas to a panel of peers and adults who determined whether the team’s venture was ready to launch. The project design allowed Ventures to take place entirely within the virtual world of TSL, in the real world, or some combination of the two.

The objectives of the D.I.D.I. Initiative were to examine to what extent a virtual medium can promote youth change-making; explore online/offline transferability of youth development and social initiatives; and determine the extent to which online endeavours affected youth’s mindset about leadership and initiative. In this paper we will focus on leadership skills developed during teens’ experience with the D.I.D.I. Initiative. Specifically, we discuss:

1. Leadership skills that youth gained throughout their D.I.D.I. venture process,
2. Teens’ perceptions about who is a leader / what it means to be a leader.

2. Methodology

The participants in this project were between the age group of 13-18 years. We collected data in the form of pre- and post-surveys, documents of action plans, and interviews with team leaders. 41 D.I.D.I participants from 22 different teams (out of 39 teams) responded to the survey. The survey had Likert scale and open ended questions that captured teens’ experiences, change in the mindset about leadership and social initiatives, and skill gains. We analyzed quantitative data with SPSS 16. To analyze qualitative data, we created a list of deductive codes and sub-codes, based on the literature on leadership skills. The deductive codes were further supplemented with inductive codes that came up from the qualitative data. The data was coded using NVivo 8.

3. Findings

D.I.D.I. reached more than 185 young people during 18 months. Almost half of them initiated their venture either as a team leader or a team member sharing responsibilities in their venture. Teams consisted of at least two people. One of them took the role of the team leader and the other(s) became co-leader(s) or team member(s). Data analysis revealed several leadership skills youths gained or improved during their experience in D.I.D.I. Initiative.

3.1. Innovation / planning / management

TSL with its simulated environment supported teens' creativity and encouraged them to try out new things with less risk or repercussions than that in the real world. It also provided them with a community to share, to learn from, and to make changes in/through. The open-ended feature of TSL supported teens' visions and enabled them to be creative with their venture idea, planning and implementation.

The venture process was not an easy process to go through especially for those without previous experiences. The participants had to come up with an idea, find team members who believed in the idea and then create a detailed venture plan that would be judged as viable by a panel. The workshops guided teens through this process of creating a plan detailing vision, action plan, budget, sustainability plan and so on. After this experience, 29 out of 41 survey respondents said they were a little or a lot more confident that they could initiate projects to benefit their online community. Teens were also confident that they could apply what they learned in offline situations if they had enough resources. A participant of the team Let's Get Together said, *"Well, of course, we learned actual skills that weren't just useful in game. Planning, organizing, and such other things to start projects in real life."* During the interviews, some participants showed surprise that they learned real life skills. One venturer said *"Our venture made me learn a lot – even about business!"*

3.2. Team work

Operating in a virtual environment has its benefits as well as challenges. These were apparent in the process of team formation. While teams could work together well once they were formed, virtual team building proved to be one of the biggest challenges for participants. The leaders of Team Playwright and Body Rider, who had some of the most creative venture ideas, are not active today because they could not find and retain team members to work with. Interestingly, teens who came directly to D.I.D.I. with their venture ideas without going through the workshops were the ones who had the least problems with team formation. A possible reason for this phenomenon is that these teens came to D.I.D.I. with their online friends made before they started their venture process. Knowing more people in a virtual environment or knowing people who can work with them proved to be advantageous for venturers.

Members from the ten teams of the TSL general population knew at least one team member in the virtual environment before they joined D.I.D.I. These Youth Venturers said that their relationship with their friends while working on a team was more formal. The teams learned to switch their identities from friends to co-workers when working on their ventures. A team member from *Transatlantic Crew*, a multi-country team, expressed similar sentiment - *"It was more formal and we had to know when to stop just having fun"*. A member of the team *Homelessness* expressed, *"...You had to set aside business and play time."* Some Venturers said that working together brought them closer as they needed to know each other well in order to work together. As leader of *Global S.P* put it *"...when you see someone and just say 'hi' and 'bye' it's different than working with them 'cause working with them lets you see their interest and how much you may care about the same things"*

As seen in the following excerpt, Venturers also thought that they learned to respect and get along with others during their venture process. *"...I now learned how to get along with other people and respect other peoples' ideas. I'm not the only one in the world.... there are other people who think like me and want a change...."* Youth Venturers thought that hearing others' ideas, learning from them, and putting minds together were very rewarding. While, building trust, understanding each other's level of commitment and expectations, and coordinating venture activities were some of the challenges they faced.

3.3. Communication and interpersonal skills

Being able to persuasively communicate venture ideas was an important skill participants gained through experience talking in the workshop as well as when they launched the venture and started to gather more participants. Teens quickly learned to use the affordances of internet in general and specifically TSL for communication and networking. As a member of the team *Above it* expressed *“In SL, the knowledge can spread better.... 50 people in a room can be over 200 (if they have 4 friends but most people have more) by the time you think of friends and such the # is a lot more... you can show what you are doing by building and RL that can cost a lot more than the 200 usd we asked for”*

Frequent communication is more important in online environments as compared to face-to-face interactions (Zigurs, 2003). Communication tools built in TSL as well as the overall digital environment allowed geographically spread out teens, to communicate with each other and build a sense of trust among team members. It allowed synchronous communication using different media as well as asynchronous co-production of team artifacts. It also provided flexibility for one to many conversations and one-to-one conversations with TSL residents.

3.4. Understanding self/self reflection

Initiating a project requires being aware of one's own abilities and a level of confidence in oneself. The thinking ball activity in the workshop started this process for the participants. The activity encouraged them to make their skill sets, knowledge and passions explicit so that they could come up with venture ideas that took advantage of their skills and advance what they were passionate about. The Teens learned very quickly that they might not have all the answers but by collaborating and reaching out to their network of friends online they can lead successful projects.

Having targets to reach in the form of specific steps in the venture helped teens assess themselves as they progressed. Being able to create change, even going through the process of preparing documents for their ventures, gave confidence to teens that they could achieve their goals. As the team leader of HHH expressed - *“... as a venture team leader...I learned how to trust myself and my knowledge to guide me through the process of developing a project. All of these things have helped me better myself as a leader now, and I'm sure will be even more helpful and important as time goes on.”*

The venture process as well as the evaluation encouraged participants to reflect on their strategies and actions. As the leader of Global S.P shared - *“If I could do differently, I would have laid off a few team members, and reorganized our team to be more beneficial to the community, as it was going it was just focusing on the money ☹”*. The reflections on the DIDI experience were visible also through the participants' recommendations to new team leaders. Here is an example – *“Have a lot of time on your hands when you are just starting out. Have back ups and "fail" proof plans if one thing doesn't work ... one thing we tried was a race track with a whole race thing... room is import and the race track just took up to much so you need to think "low prim" on SL....”* - Global S.P. leader.

3.5. What did it mean to be a leader?

Van Linden and Fertman (1998), propose three stages of leadership skill development - awareness, interaction, and mastery. From the interviews and survey responses we could see that the participants had started forming mental model of what it meant to be a leader as well as started reflecting on and exploring their own leadership potential based on these mental models.

When respondents were asked if anybody can be a leader, 66% of the participants said “yes”. Significantly more team members from active teams thought that anybody could be a leader ($t < 0.05$). Venturers were asked how a leader should/should not be, based on their experiences with DIDI. The following four behaviours were commonly pointed out. A leader should be: 1) Determined /shouldn't give up - participants of the active teams indicated this as a crucial part of being a leader; 2) Able to communicate with their team members and respect their ideas; 3) Responsible and organized; 4) Persuasive.

Participants' self reports of their ability to be a leader were based on this mental model of what it meant to be a leader. While some of the venturers were bogged down by challenges related to planning and budgeting, others became more confident by overcoming the challenges. The more venturers overcame challenges, the more confident they became in their abilities. Participants' enthusiasm towards their venture idea was correlated with reports of becoming a better leader after participating in D.I.D.I initiative. We also found a significant correlation between

being a leader and reporting improvement in leadership skills ($t < 0.05$). In future project design adding a rotating leadership position providing experience to all team members might have more impact on self-efficacy.

4. Discussion/Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Success of the D.I.D.I. program indicates that a virtual world can be used to develop collaboration amongst teens from different parts of the country (or world) and enhance leadership skills. Wenger (1998) contends that learners need “places of engagement” and “ways of having an effect on the world and making their actions matter.” (p. 271). Virtual worlds can be used by youth leadership development programs as “places of engagement,” where teens can meet their peers through formal or informal learning activities, in the process gaining leadership and entrepreneurship skills. The D.I.D.I. workshops did not specifically focus on building leadership skills but by providing a safe environment to experiment with entrepreneurship, leadership skills became a by-product. The affordances of TSL such as accessibility, social nature, multimodality, low risk taking, and workability with web 2.0 technologies coupled with ability to experience it through an avatar and ability to create the environment facilitated the development of these skills.

The social networking tools built in TSL allowed teens to leverage not only their resources but the resources of others in the TSL virtual community to be effective leaders. This resonates with Ancona et al's (2007) conceptualization of 21st century leaders as ‘incomplete leaders’ who are aware of their strengths and weakness and harness the resources available to make up for their limitations.

Though some participants learned by overcoming their limitations and challenges they faced, others were bogged down and dropped out of the program. The experience affected their outlook about leadership. In general, inactive team members took less out of the program and developed negative outlook towards leadership and civic activities. To avoid this D.I.D.I. staff or mentors need to develop processes that identify issues in the early stage. In future, resources like sample plans, budgets as well as accessibility to content and process experts might also prove beneficial for participants to succeed.

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